

Christmas for Halloween

By Peter Stone Brown

There are many ways to view or react Bob Dylan's decision to record a Christmas album, and probably all of them make sense. I always figured he'd do one eventually and when the album was announced several weeks ago, my initial reaction was, why now? I would've expected it about 28 years ago, but after 46 years of following Dylan, I learned long ago that predicting anything he's going to do is futile.

Shortly after the announcement of the album, it was also announced the album, *Christmas In The Heart*, would be a benefit, Dylan would be donating all royalties present and future to three organizations that combat world hunger, Feeding America in the United States; Crisis, in Great Britain; and the United Nations' World Hunger Program.

It's important to remember that just about every artist with a recording contract, and of many musical genres has recorded a Christmas album at some point, and if they haven't done a Christmas album, they've done a Christmas song of some kind, and this includes musicians as diverse as Joan Baez, John Fahey and Asleep At The Wheel. It's certainly a grand American (if not worldwide) pop music tradition. And Bob Dylan, despite whatever mantels have been hung on him, has increasingly demonstrated he's an artist in the great American tradition.

Singing Christmas songs can be fun. I learned that a long time ago, when I attended a progressive private school in the Philly suburbs, and we had learn a bunch of Christmas songs for a school show. Singing those rather intricate harmonies right beside me was one person who would go onto to found and lead America's great Western Swing revival band, and another who would write and produce a major TV show and some movies as well. None of us were Christians, though other kids in the class were. But my memory of it, after getting past the initial groans and grumbling, was that it was fun. (For the same presentation, I was also picked to play Santa Claus for all the kids in nursery school and kindergarten, even though I was one of the shortest and skinniest kids in the class, but that's another story.)

A couple of weeks ago, Amazon's UK site - probably wrongly, since they were quickly removed - posted sound clips of the album. The reaction in the online Dylan community, which consists of innumerable discussion forums was pretty much a collective *Yikes!*

My own response to the clips was *Self Portrait Revisited*. Another friend suggested that perhaps Dylan was getting too comfortable with a decade of good reviews and hit, often number one albums, and had to do something to shake things up. However before the clips appeared, another friend, author, CP Lee, who has written two books on Dylan wrote me that he considered it "Dylan's greatest master stroke. As he gets older you can see little lumps of the 1950s chrystalising/forming around him."

Some of the Amazon clips, especially the ones with total white bread sounding backup vocals suggested schlock of the highest order, and generic instrumental backing. However, those clips, for whatever reason were ultimately deceptive.

On the album, Dylan is backed by three members of his regular touring band, bassist, Tony Garnier, drummer George Recili, Donnie Heron, on steel, trumpet, mandolin, violin and trumpet, and David Hidalgo returning on guitar, accordion, mandolin, and violin, as well as Patrick Warren on keyboards and celeste, and a crew of background singers, including the duo, The Ditty Bops. Dylan as usual, is guitar, electric piano and harp.

The arrangements are perhaps the most carefully crafted of any album Dylan has released. Everything is deliberate. The backup vocal parts, complete with rounds, were absolutely thought out. The playing is uniformly excellent, with not a misplaced note, with Donnie Herron, again showing why he is one of the most valuable members of Dylan's band, something that isn't necessarily apparent at Dylan's live performances, where his work is often buried in the sound mix.

For the song selection Dylan chose the route (for the most part) right down the middle of the road, mixing classic carols with pop music Christmas songs. There are of course Christmas songs in every genre, traditional folk, bluegrass, blues and rock and roll. Dylan may have had Minnesota in mind, but it doesn't matter. In keeping with his last two albums, and in keeping with an onstage exploration of American music that's been happening at his concerts in various forms and at various times, during the past 15 years, if not his entire career, that he chose this route makes total sense. That said, (not that I'm ever going to tell Bob Dylan what to do), there's a couple of songs I would have liked to hear him sing. Leadbelly has a cool song called, "Christmas Is Coming," and I think he could have done a great job on "Go Tell It On The Mountain," and I can also imagine a fairly rocking, "Children, Go Where I Send Thee."

What makes *Christmas In The Heart* perhaps the most unique Christmas album ever is that Dylan's voice has been shot for a while now. He's not quite in Tom Waits territory, but close, perhaps with as another friend suggested, a touch of Jimmy Durante. I once wrote he was a young man with an old man's voice. He is now that older man, and the years of going after the sound of the great old blues and country singers, the years of singing with a different voice on every album, not to mention probably a million or more cigarettes have taken their toll. But like all great singers - and Dylan is a great singer - he's found ways to work within his limitations. So against this very smooth, often exquisite backing, you have this singer with this extremely rough voice. There are times, when you think he's never sounded more tender, or more gentle. There are times you can imagine him playing with his grandkids, and there are times where he's never sounded more sincere. In other words, he's really singing, and some of these melodies are the most demanding and challenging he's ever done. The tension, and there's never been a Bob Dylan album without some sort of tension, especially on the first couple of listens is whether he's going to hit what he's going for, and he usually does. It may be some of the roughest note hitting you've ever heard, but he does get there.

This is an album where mentioning standouts doesn't matter. Dylan sounds most at home for obvious reasons on "The Christmas Blues." The most fun track is a dead on cover of Brave Combo's polka rendition of, "Must Be Santa." Yes, that's right, polka! Complete with accordion, and it's a riot. Everyone sounds like they're on the verge of cracking up singing it too. This of course brought a worldwide collective WHAAAT!!!!!!??? among Dylan fans when the sound clip emerged. There's also the Hawaiian, "Christmas Island," where you half expect Leon Redbone to drop in for a guest verse at any moment. Dylan is at his most gentle on "Little Drummer Boy," a song I always knew that if he ever did a Christmas album, he would do. Both "Winter Wonderland" and "The Christmas Song," have touches of western swing in the arrangements. Unfortunately, they don't have original song credits, so I don't know if Herron is doubling on fiddle and steel, or if the fiddle is David Hidalgo.

The traditional carols are the ones I keep going back to. "O' Come All Ye Faithful" has an arrangement that is close to baroque music with trumpet and bowed string bass, and incredibly enough, Dylan sings the first verse in Latin, which is something I never thought possible.

So yeah, Bob Dylan made a Christmas album, a real one. And because it's Bob Dylan, is all the baggage that goes with Bob Dylan, the absurdity of it, and also the realness of it. And one could make a good

case for it being another exploration of American music, 'cause it is that. And there's a bit of sly humor it as well. It may be the craziest thing he's ever done in a long list of fairly crazy things, or it could be as CP Lee said, "His greatest master stroke." And yep, it will have its detractors. But there's some great playing, and a lot of genuine real feeling. So while the rest of the world may be going to hell, be of good cheer.